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PASSOVER REFLECTIONS ON SOVIET JEWRY

Every year as we celebrate Passover, the Festival of Freedom, I devote this column to some thoughts about the circumstances and prospects for the Jews of the Soviet Union.

Despite the enormous problems I believe we are all impressed and overjoyed at the fact that more Jews left Russia in 1979 than in any previous year. Regardless of what the future may hold, there are now approximately 50,000 more Jews free to pursue their personal aspirations as well as cultural and religious yearnings beyond the reach of the totalitarian Soviet state.

Before we heap paens of praise on the Russians we ought to examine both the composition of the Jewish population being allowed to leave and the likely Soviet motives.

We find among those leaving the Soviet Union a disproportionate number of elderly people, a disproportionate number of people in poor health and a remarkably generous sprinkling of "activists". By sending out the old and the sick the Russians save themselves the expense and bother of providing these people with the pensions and health care to which they would be entitled. Conversely in harsh manpower terms the Russians lose nothing. These elderly and sick individuals have long since passed their most productive years. (Surely the Russians relish the thought of adding to Israel's economic burdens the support of a large elderly and infirm aliyah.)

One would think that outspoken activists who have stood up to the behemoth of the Soviet state would be punished by never being

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allowed to leave. Soviet policy is a bit more devious than that. On the one hand, many activists are refused permission to leave year after year. This demonstrates to other Soviet Jews the grave dangers of activism. On the other hand, many tough and outspoken Jews are allowed to leave. For the Soviets this is a convenient way of getting rid of "troublemakers" and disruptive elements" while, at the same, time, currying favor with the West with a "liberal" emigration policy.

What depresses me most is the possibility that the systematic granting of exit visas to the most culturally, nationalistically and religiously committed Jews will deprive the vast masses of Soviet Jewry of the courageous leaders and exemplars so essential to their spiritual survival. I dread the thought of over two million Soviet Jews left behind - bereft of those amongst them who know some Jewish history, who can teach basic Hebrew, who can conduct prayer services, etc.

How I wish and how I pray that liberalized Soviet emigration policy had a counterpart in liberalized internal policy towards the Jews. Despite the exodus of 50,000 it is still extremely difficult and dangerous to try to obtain a Siddur, mezuzah or pair of tefillin. Maps of Israel -- secular books on Jewish history and western newspapers reporting on developments in the Middle East are no easier to come by.

And what of those who have been singled out for use as propaganda symbols? Anatoly Shcharansky's family believes his life may be in danger from some serious neurological ailment. When did he last see a neurologist? Ida Nudel has been exiled to an area inhabited primarily by the roughest and most violent Soviet criminals. She lives under the most primitive conditions. Her health too is failing. Yet neither the ups nor the downs of detente have caused the Russians to swerve from their brutal course.

Despite the global dimensions of the Soviet Jewry problem we can in our own corner of the world make some difference. We in Los Angeles have innumerable opportunities to help bring Russian Jews who

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have settled here into the mainstream of our community. If we put aside monetary consideration we can provide a synagogue setting, a Jewish educational setting and a Jewish sponsored context for personal adjustment and occupational development. Many of us are already doing these things. New faces will be greatly welcomed.

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